

1 Introduction: From ambition to action

This white paper by the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD) charts directions for how donors can support food systems transformation to follow up on the United Nations Food Systems Summit (FSS) and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It builds on work that the GDPRD has completed over the past two years as contributions to the Summit process (see [FIGURE 1](#)). In particular, this includes the outcomes of the [2020 Annual General Assembly](#), a [High Level Event](#) held in the lead-up to the Summit, a [Stocktaking Report on Donor Contributions to Food Systems](#), a [Declaration of Intent on Food Systems Transformation](#) and a [Roundtable on How Donors Can Support National Pathways for Food Systems Transformation](#).

Global donors (bilateral agencies, financial institutions, development banks and philanthropic foundations) have a critical role to play in helping to leverage change in food systems through the investments they make, the innovations they support and the international collaboration they enable. However, donors will need to think and work differently. Transforming food systems will require deep structural changes in societal understanding, in how markets function, in public policy and expenditure, and in processes of innovation, all of which are influenced by power relations and vested interests. These changes need to be brought about within a context of increasing global complexity, uncertainty and turbulence. To be effective, donors will have to focus on interventions that create the enabling conditions for systemic change, are responsive and adaptive to rapidly changing circumstances, and tackle the political and economic barriers to equitable and sustainable development.

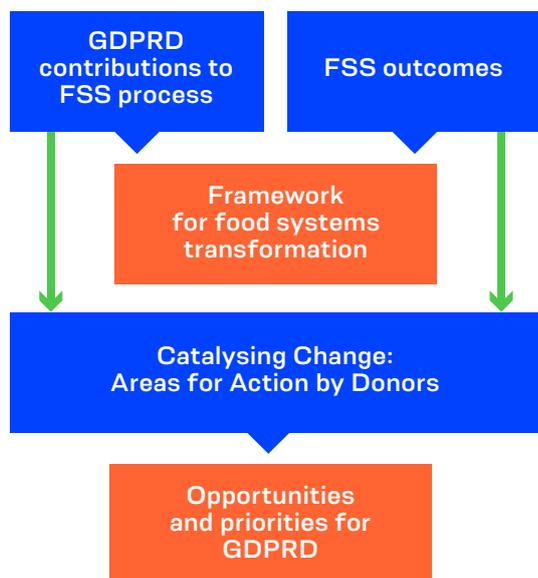
The GDPRD recognizes that food systems transformation requires an integrated approach to how issues of poverty and inequality, health, food security and nutrition, gender equality, environment, biodiversity loss, climate change, youth engagement and other challenges are tackled. It has working groups focused on some of these topics that are most directly related to rural development, including rural youth employment, land tenure and SDG 2.

The Summit process mobilized widespread engagement from across governments, civil society, farmers' organizations, business and science, all of which was underpinned by the national and cross-cutting Summit dialogue processes. The need for profound changes in food systems – the **why** of food systems transformation – has been unambiguously laid out with backing from

FIGURE 1
The activities of the GDPRD engaging with the food systems framework and the Food Systems Summit



FIGURE 2
Outline and structure of the white paper



heads of state and numerous civil society, business and research groups. High ambitions have been set for **what** is needed to deliver on healthy diets, zero hunger, equitable earnings for all food system actors, positive impacts on nature, and net-zero emissions across food value chains. However, to realize these ambitions will require much more attention to the **how** of food systems transformation to ensure practical and feasible pathways for action, particularly at national and local levels.

The directions and analysis in this white paper draw on and integrate the numerous and varied outcomes of the FSS, as well as

the GDPRD Summit-related events and analysis (see **FIGURE 2**). In addition, 19 interviews were conducted with GDPRD members and other actors who had been closely engaged with the Summit. These interviews add detail and depth to the forward-looking analysis of FSS outcomes and past GDPRD work, and provide nuance on the role that donors and the GDPRD can play in taking the food systems agenda forward.

The analysis leads to three overarching implications for donors:

Coordination, alignment, integration and coherence: Food systems transformation will not be achieved without coordination among actors, alignment of investments and initiatives, integration across sectors, and a commitment to policy coherence. Through the investments they make and their approaches to programming, donors have a critical influence on all actors in the system, and are especially important at national level in supporting host countries to develop a regulatory and policy framework that supports integrated food systems. At the same time, donors are a part of the global food system and must commit to systemic transformation in their own countries as well.

Tackling the structural barriers to change: To be effective in supporting food systems transformation, donors will need to pay more attention to the structural barriers and enabling conditions for change, and the associated power dynamics of differing stakeholder interests. This implies balancing field-level direct poverty alleviation projects, which often stand alone, with programmes that aim to improve the longer-term enabling conditions for change. Donors can leverage their financial resources and political influence to help address structural barriers through policy innovation and by supporting inclusive processes. Donors also play a distinct role in national, regional and global priority-setting and standards, and can set expectations that reflect the underlying principles of food systems transformation.

Adopting a systemic approach: The FSS has made explicit the importance of a systems approach in addressing food-related issues and development challenges. This implies moving beyond overly simplified linear and target-oriented approaches to designing, managing and evaluating development investments. It means accepting and working with the complexity and uncertainty inherent in intervening in human and natural systems. This requires being more rigorous in developing a systems understanding of the context for an investment and managing in a flexible, adaptive and learning-oriented way. This has substantial capacity and organizational implications for both donors and their partners.

The areas of action outlined in this white paper are intended by the GDPRD to be a basis for:

- Dialogue between donors and other actors on how donors can strengthen their catalytic role in supporting food systems transformation
- Donors, individually and collectively, to assess what changes in their investments and programming approach may be appropriate
- Donors to consider new joint or aligned efforts to improve the overall enabling environment for food systems transformation
- Supporting collaboration between the United Nations Food Systems Coordination Hub and donors, and, where appropriate, contribution of donors' interventions to the implementation of countries' national pathways
- The GDPRD to identify priority areas to support its membership in following up on the FSS
- Following up on how donors have responded to support food systems transformation.

